Nature in Leicester's Parks

Introduction

Most people in Leicester live within walking distance of a park. As well as being great places to stretch your legs and meet your friends, did you know that they are also havens for wildlife?

In the summer of 2023, Leicester Friends of the Earth volunteers decided to investigate how much wildlife was living in the city's parks and give an award to the most nature-friendly park. We visited parks between 8 and 20 hectares, so that we weren't comparing the smallest and largest parks, and we looked at the range of habitats in each one, from ponds and boggy areas, to meadow grassland and woodland. We were amazed at how many plants, birds and bats we found. This booklet mentions just a few of them but we hope it inspires you to travel beyond your own neighbourhood and visit more of Leicester's parks!

friends of the earth Leicester

Hamilton Park

Much loved by the people who live in this area, Hamilton Park is something of a wildlife gem. From Sandhills Avenue, you walk into a wooded area and can follow a path around the lake, which collects rainwater from the nearby housing estate. If you keep walking north past the lake, you'll come to an area of short grass and benches, with a view across the nearby industrial estate. There is space for sports and children's games. It is a large, quiet park, enjoyed by dog walkers with lots of nature-rich areas. There is a play area for older children just off Sandhills Avenue.

Hamilton Park is divided into two halves. The lake in the middle of the park is home to swans, coots, geese and ducks. If you come at twilight on a warm summer evening you will also have the excitement of being able

Field Maple

Noctule bat

to watch Noctule bats, one of the larger UK bat species, flying above the lake to feed on insects, while smaller Common Pipistrelles fly around the edge of the trees. Near to the park is another wetland – labelled as a mindfulness area – which has a stream running through it with some exciting bog plants.

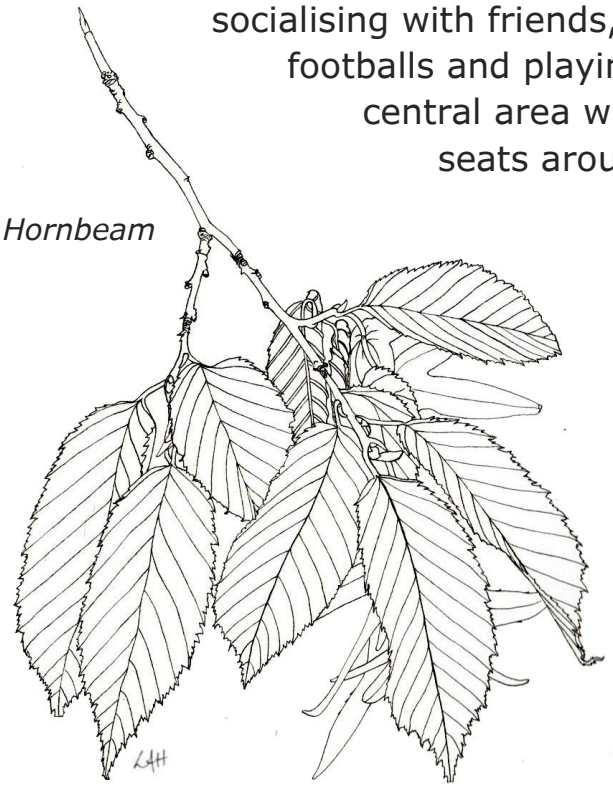
There are some wonderful native trees in the woodland area around the lake and the sports field, including Field Maple, Common Dogwood and Hawthorn. Blackthorn and Bramble provide berries for birds and people in the autumn. If you're visiting in the spring, listen out for the Song Thrushes, Chiffchaffs and Blackbirds singing in the trees. There are wildflowers growing too, such as Thistles, Buttercups, Ragwort, Red Clover and Nettles, loved by the bees and butterflies.

One of the surprises of this park is the number of rabbits! You can see big groups out feeding on the nearby field and they also make their way into the park in abundance.

Catch the 58 or 58A bus from the Haymarket Bus Station to get to Hamilton Park.

Spinney Hill Park

Spinney Hill Park is a well used and loved community park. The whole park is visible from both main entrances; from Mere Road the ground slopes down to the brook with good views of Leicester beyond. From East Park Road the view takes in the main grassy areas up to a group of trees planted in rows. There are clearly marked paths, a children's play area on one side and a ball park for older children on the opposite side. There are benches throughout, as well as some picnic tables, and over the week and weekend it is filled with people watching their children in the play area, socialising with friends, riding bikes, kicking footballs and playing cricket. There is a central area with flowerbeds and seats around a café and a bowling green.



Hornbeam

The most striking natural backdrop to this human activity is the park's individual old trees – Oaks, Beech, Horse Chestnut, Holly and London Planes, which stand along the paths.

Little Egret

These trees provide enjoyment year-round, whether full of leaf and fruit in summer and autumn or bare-branched in winter. There is a fenced-off wild area near St Saviour's Rd which hosts wildflowers such as Red Campion.

The brook flows from East Park Road along banks with lush vegetation in the summer, including Cow Parsley, Purple and Yellow Loosestrife. This provides a food source for the solitary Little Egret, which visits regularly, using its feet to stir up tiny organisms to eat, and the loafing male and female Mallard Ducks. Adult and juvenile Grey Wagtails try their luck along the water's edge outside the breeding season, while Mistle Thrushes explore the upper grassy areas for food. You can hear the calls of Robins, Wrens and Magpies and watch fearless squirrels competing with each other for a winter cache of nuts.

Catch the 15 bus from Charles St or 38/38A bus from Humberstone Gate to get to Spinney Hill Park.

Evington Park

Yellow Rattle

Evington Park was once the garden for a big house, which you can still see in the middle of the park, although it's now a community building used for classes and events. Some of the features of the old garden remain, with the Burnaby Gardens and a soft fruit garden immediately behind the house and roses on one side. If you enter the park from The Common, before you reach the house you will find tennis courts, a bowling green and an outdoor gym. Behind the house, towards Ethel Road, there are football and cricket pitches – everything you could want to keep fit! There is also a cycle path through the park and the route round the oval flowerbed directly in front of the house is very popular with Evington's smallest cyclists. There is a children's play area in the centre of the park, with plenty of benches for tired parents.

As well as all these facilities for human visitors, the park has a range of interesting habitats for its wild inhabitants. There are a wide variety of old trees along the paths and around the sports areas, including Beech,

Lime, Silver Birch, Redwood and Poplar. Behind the soft fruit garden there are two ponds, where you can stand on the platform to look for tadpoles and dragonflies. Perhaps the most interesting part of the park for those who love their plants is the rough grassland along Ethel Road, which is a designated Local Wildlife Site and has several less common species of grass as well as orchids and other wildflowers, including Yellow Rattle. The rough grass must be sheltering small mammals too because Red Kites can often be seen flying over the park, looking for their dinner. You can distinguish them from other birds of prey by their forked tails and angled wings.

Catch the 22/22A/22E bus from Charles St to get to Evington Park.

Red Kite

Humberstone Park

Twin Oak Trees

Opened in 1925, Humberstone is a large park. The main entrance from the busy Uppingham Rd leads to a car park and well supported cafe with outdoor seats. There are other entrances from the backstreets south of the main road. In addition to a free tennis court and bowling green, there is some exercise equipment at this top end, near the flowerbeds. The path leads down past a big play area, more exercise equipment and a skateboarding structure. A stream circles the park, which has been canalised (enclosed in concrete) in part. Examples of wildlife that thrive in the more open area at the right-hand end include Mallard Ducks, Moorhen, Grey Wagtail and Little Egret. Beyond the stream the park opens out into the main grassy area with mature trees such as Lime, Oak, Ash, Sycamore and Copper Beech. Access is via a circular shared pedestrian and cycle track, popular

with walkers, cyclists and people with children in buggies. There are picnic tables and benches at regular intervals.

Resident Mistle Thrush and winter migrant Redwings exploit food sources hiding in the grass. This park has a large wild nature area called Rally Bank, which extends along the right-hand side of the park and includes a woodland area at ground level and an upper area accessed via steps. Here, local history enthusiasts can explore the traces of an old railway embankment. This area supports some wildflowers such as Cow Parsley, Red Campion, Common Vetch and bird life including migrant Blackcap and Chiffchaff.

The far end of the park has a muddy area where the stream runs freely along the boundary fence before joining the canalised water. The trees form a canopy along the boundary fence and beyond. Here, if you are lucky, you may see nocturnal badgers scuffing the grass edges looking for earthworms. Woodpeckers drum at the tree trunks in season and in the evening Common Pipistrelle bats fly over the woodland edge. People enjoy this park in all seasons, whether making the most of the cafe area, playing tennis, relaxing with children on the play area, walking, exercising, picnicking on the tables or playing football on the grass.

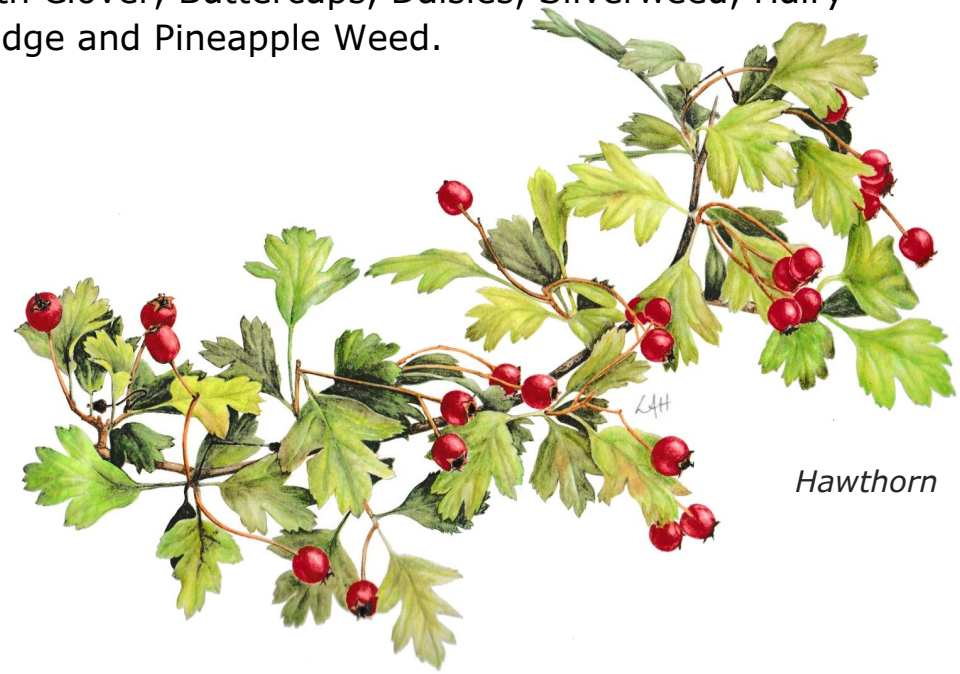
Chiffchaff

Catch the 15 bus from Charles St or 38/38A bus from Humberstone Gate to get to Humberstone Park.

Willowbrook Park

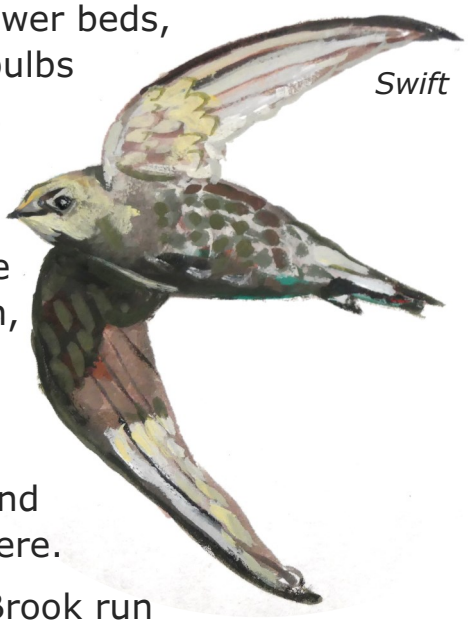
Willowbrook Park is in Thurncourt, to the east of the city, which can be reached via Thurncourt Road, Dakyn Road or Gelert Avenue. There are overgrown hedgerows throughout the park, providing a reminder of its former use as farmland. The hedgerows include Hawthorn, which gives off a scent you will notice.

The park is a great space for the community, with something to attract most people. It has children's play areas, sports fields and large open areas of grass used for playing and walking. The different habitats mean there's plenty of wildlife to spot too. Most of the grass in the park is kept short, but some areas are left unmown, with Clover, Buttercups, Daisies, Silverweed, Hairy Sedge and Pineapple Weed.



Hawthorn

You won’t find any formal flower beds, but in the spring, there are bulbs that attract pollinators.



Swift

There are areas of woodland throughout the park, in which you’ll see a wide range of trees including Silver Birch, Willow, Sycamore, Horse Chestnut, Ash and Oak. Fruit trees such as Apple, Cherry, Cherry Plum, Plum and Conference Pear also grow here.

Thurnby Brook and Bushby Brook run through the park towards each other, then flow to the west towards Dakyn Road through a quiet, boggier area leading to a pond. The banks of the streams are left unmown, allowing Cow Parsley, Red Campion and other species to grow. If you head down steps in the centre of the park into the boggy area, you’ll find a wide variety of plant species to enjoy, including Teasels, Thistles, Great Willowherb, Meadow Vetchling and Meadowsweet.

All these plants and trees mean that there are lots of birds attracted to the park. Look out for Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Swift and Dunnock, as well as more familiar species such as the Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit – and you may even see a Sparrowhawk!

Catch the 37/38/38A bus from Humberstone Gate to get to Willowbrook Park.

Stokeswood Park

Blackcap

Stokeswood Park stretches along Stokes Drive and Groby Road in the north-west of the city, between two allotment sites. For many people, it provides a convenient, quiet, green cut-through when walking or cycling into town.

But if you spend longer in the park, you can enjoy a stunning view across the city from the south-east end of the park and some interesting wildlife habitat.

Much of this park is woodland, with many native trees, including Willow, Elm, Damson, Silver Birch, Sycamore, Oak and Ash. The lower level of scrubby bushes below the trees, with Blackthorn, Rose and Hawthorn, provides cover for the birds, as well as berries in the autumn. You can hear many of our native songbirds here in the spring, including Chiffchaff, Song Thrush, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Blackcap and Common Whitethroat. If you're trying to learn to recognise birdsongs, this would be a good park to visit!

There is a small pond in the middle of the park, which has recently been dug out by Leicester Environmental Volunteers, so look out for more wildlife visiting the Yellow Flag Irises there now. You might even be able to spot some dragonflies. Keep walking through the park towards the south-east and you will find a well-established meadow, which is full of flowers, bees, butterflies and moths during the summer months. You can see Yellow Rattle, Meadow Buttercup, Ox-Eye Daisy and Bird's-foot Trefoil all growing here. There is a path mown through the middle with long grass turning into scrub under the trees. At the end of this path, there is a fantastic view through the trees across Leicester. This park may not provide any play or exercise equipment but for those who want to find nature in the middle of the city, it has plenty to offer.

Catch the 162 or 27/28/29 bus from St Margarets bus station to get to Stokeswood Park.

Bird's-foot Trefoil

Appleton Park

Appleton Park is a comparatively young park, being surrounded by Troon Way to the north east, the Midland Mainline to the south east and the Rowley Fields estate wrapping round the remainder with a short length of the Melton Brook just touching the southern edge. It was built on the site of two old brick works and has three distinct areas: the sports pitches, with access from Troon Way to the north; a well-maintained recreational space for children's play, accessible from Rowley Fields to the south; and a large wild area in the middle.

Teasel

One of the old brick works was the Belgrave Brick Company. It doesn't appear to have been in operation long, the first known reference being in 1898 and by 1919 it is shown on a map as disused. It is one of many brick works around Leicester and one wonders how many of the buildings we admire today were built with bricks sourced from this park.

Speckled Wood Butterfly

The wild area has some paths mown through it that run right across to the railway and down to the brook. The paths allow you to walk through the meadow and see the variety of wildflowers that are growing here. Look out for Clover, Ragwort and Teasels, which attract nectar-loving pollinating insects, including the beautiful Speckled Wood butterfly. Among the trees around the edge of the meadow, you can hear birds including Chiffchaffs, who always sing their own name, and Common Whitethroats, who visit in the summer and spend their winters in Africa, Arabia and Pakistan. In the evening, you might also find Common Pipistrelle bats flying along the edge of the trees, looking for insects.

Catch the 4 or 21 bus from Haymarket bus station to get to Appleton Park.

I spy, with my nature-friendly eye....

Tick off the plants and creatures you have seen!

…In Hamilton Park	Field Maple tree	☐
	Noctule bats	☐
…In Spinney Hill Park	Hornbeam tree	☐
	Little Egret	☐
…In Evington Park	Yellow Rattle	☐
	Red Kite	☐
…In Humberstone Park	Twin Oak trees	☐
	Chiffchaff	☐
…In Willowbrook Park	Hawthorn tree	☐
	Swift	☐
…In Stokeswood Park	Bird’s-foot trefoil	☐
	Blackcap	☐
…In Appleton Park	Teasel	☐
	Speckled Wood butterfly	☐

Illustrations by Lindsay-Anne Heald (plants) and Samuel Shaw (birds, bat and butterfly).

Words by Alison Skinner, Bruce Wakley, Hannah Wakley, Melanie Wakley and Jenny Whillis. Edited by Michele Witthaus.

Did you know that Leicester's parks are havens for wildlife?

This booklet was created by Leicester Friends of the Earth, a grassroots environmental action group. We campaign on issues such as biodiversity, climate change, air pollution and plastic. We want to encourage everyone to connect with nature on their doorstep.

friends of the earth Leicester